

Pestilence by dragonartist5

Series: [Lost and Found \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

Four years after the events of Season 1, Will's sickness awakens after a long remission. El, Mike, and the gang deal with PTSD, high school, and the roller coaster that is love. Meanwhile, the Gate may have reopened. And whatever happened to the other test subjects? Sequel to "Lost and Found".

1. 1987

Author's Note:

PLEASE READ This can be found on FF.net, completed. I will be uploading a couple chapters at a time. After the incredible response it received on FF.net, I have decided to to open it up to a wider audience.

El grips Mike's wrist with one hand, the other is shoved deep inside her pocket. Her breath swirls in little clouds of white around her mouth and nose. Mike's fingertips tap an irregular beat on her knuckles, gazing distractedly at the ticket booth. The line is ridiculously long, and it's ridiculously cold outside. Her socks are soaked through, and the slush around their feet is dirty and melting.

She presses her shoulder into his chest, more out of a desire for warmth than anything else. Mike's arms encircle her instinctively. He rests his chin on the top of her head. Dustin, swathed in a knitted scarf and two sweatshirts, rolls his eyes at them. Lucas pretends to throw up, making fake choking noises behind his hand. A smirk is painted across his face.

"Oh, grow up." Mike groans, blushing slightly. El doesn't say anything at all. Will chuckles.

"Well, while you two stay here and suck face, I'm going to get some popcorn." Dustin says, marching off with an exaggerated eye roll.

"Get our tickets, will you?" He calls over his shoulder. Mike swears under his breath, gesturing rudely at Dustin's back as he walks away. El tries to suppress her laughter, burying her face inside Mike's jacket. Lucas shakes his head, chuckling, and takes off after Dustin with Will following suit.

"Those little bastards, left us out here in the cold." Mike grumbles under his breath.

"The line's starting to move." She says, resurfacing from the jacket to

look around.

"Yeah, you're right."

He keeps one arm around her as they approach the ticket booth. The sky has begun to darken by the time they make it inside the theater, stomping the slush from their shoes.

"When I find Dustin, I'm going to-"

"Murder me? I got you some popcorn, dumbass. Chill out, the movie's about to start."

Dustin, Lucas and Will appear behind them, still smirking.

Mike shrugs, cracking a grin.

"Don't expect a thank you." Mike snatches the popcorn out of his hand, shoving a handful into his mouth to make a point.

"Hey, I paid for that with my own money!"

"Thank you, Dustin." El says, patting him on the shoulder.

"Traitor." Mike says, good naturedly. He narrows his eyes in mock suspicion, then glances at his watch.

"We better go if we want good seats."

Mike grabs El's hand and pulls her forward, into the theater, which is already crowded. They manage to get seats in the far left corner, and Lucas complains loudly until Dustin smacks him on the arm and tells him to shut up.

Mike leans over and rests his head on her shoulder.

"Sorry we couldn't get great seats." He says, tiredly. El holds her breath, caresses the circles under his eyes with her fingertips. He allows his eyes to close, briefly. A lump forms in her throat as she looks at him, at the exhaustion written in his face. He is so tired, so vulnerable. And she knows some of it is her fault. She pushes the thought away.

"It's okay." She whispers, kissing him on the forehead. "You forget that four years ago I didn't even know about movie theaters. Remember the first time you ever took me to one?"

Mike bites his lip and smiles, eyes still closed. The weariness melts from his face.

"Oh, yeah. We saw *Ghostbusters*. And it was, like, totally awesome."

El chuckles, resting her cheek against his hair as the lights dim.

. . .

The movie is good. Mike, though he tries to stay awake for her sake, nods off a few times. El could've sworn she caught him snoring once.

They pile into Dustin's car and he drives them home, having just received his license a few months earlier. They file into the Wheeler house and down to the basement, peeling off their snow-caked shoes.

Mrs. Wheeler appears at the top of the stairs, wiping her hands on her apron.

"How was the movie?"

"Great." Mike tells her. She smiles.

"You guys are welcome to stay for dinner."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler." Dustin says. She closes the door. Mike throws himself on the couch, tossing his jacket over the arm of the sofa.

"Don't forget about the campaign, Mike. Next Saturday." Lucas reminds him. Mike nods, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's gonna be our greatest yet." He says, eyes suddenly alight.

"You're gonna be there, right El?"

"Wouldn't miss it." She said, settling cross legged on the floor. Dustin

and Lucas pile onto the couch beside Mike. Will sits on the floor next to her, stretching his legs out. In lamplight, El gets a good look at his face. His eyes are shadowed, like Mike's. Maybe even more so. He is pale, his skin almost waxy. He chews on his lip. It's the first time she's *really* looked at him in a long time. He looks fragile, like he did when in those few months when she came back, and they met officially, for the first time.

She bites her lip, gnawing worry settling in her stomach.

"Mike, dinner!" Mrs. Wheeler calls from the kitchen. The boys and El troop up the stairs, seating themselves around the dining room table.

El lets the conversation wander, much of her attention balanced between the plate of spaghetti in front of her and Mike's hand as it brushes against hers under the table. Though it's been almost four years since she escaped the lab, she still isn't one for big group conversations. At least not in front of Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, who she knows well enough. They are kind, and they understand a little bit, but they are adults and adults are harder to talk to.

Mike knows. He understands. He understands more than she can ever wrap her head around. He fills in the gaps for her.

She steals glances at Will. He barely touches his food, uncharacteristically quiet. Again, her mind races and the concern for him returns. Briefly. She decides against asking him if something's wrong. It might buy him some unwanted and overbearing attention. She makes a mental note to talk to him, later.

She helps Mrs. Wheeler do the dishes, a chore she is grateful for. The reparative task quiets her mind and takes the edge off. She does everything manually, not daring to risk the bloody nose or the headache. Even though she's grown considerably stronger over the years, she won't chance it. Not today, at least, and not for something as simple as washing dishes.

One by one, Dustin, Lucas, and Will bid Mrs. Wheeler a friendly goodbye and file out the door into the frigid air. When El is finished, she finds Mike in the basement. He smiles, small and soft, when she appears at the bottom step.

"I have to go." She tells him.

"I'll walk you home." He says, jumping up from the couch. His arms open and she doesn't hesitate, walking straight into them. She breathes him in.

"You're tired." She says. She can feel the rise and fall of his chest, his heartbeat against her cheek.

"You are, too." He says, quietly. "Get some sleep tonight, okay?"

"Okay." She says, closing her eyes. A full and comfortable silence stretches between them.

"I have to go, Mike."

He takes her hand and leads her up the stairs and out the door, into the biting cold. The snow on the road is blackened and sliced open by tire tracks. Their feet follow the road. She can feel the slight limp in his leg, remaining from the bullet wound. She pushes the thought out of her head, breath catching.

"Are you done with the campaign yet?" She asks him.

"Almost. I still have a few things to sort out. Wanna help?"

El nods.

They turn the corner, and he puts his arm around her, his unzipped jacket drapes across her shoulders. It's big enough for the both of them. She closes her eyes, wearing a sleepy smile. Because he's here and he's close, and for once, everything is right with the world.

"Tomorrow after school. I need to organize my notes and stuff. We can watch a movie or something."

She nods again.

"Seriously though, El. You need sleep. Have you seen yourself in the mirror, lately?" He says, softly. He stops, hands on her elbows, turning her towards him. Their foreheads rest together. She can feel his breath on her lashes. His fingers brush the circles under her eyes,

matching her gesture back in the movie theater. She returns to brief touch, grounding herself.

Touch was bad, with Papa. Papa never liked her to touch him unless he told her to. Now, in a another life, a new beginning, touch has an entirely new meaning. She understands it a little better every day. Touch is safe. Touch is her anchor. He is her anchor, in a black sea. In a world surrounded by shadow.

"I know." She says. "You need sleep, too, Mike. You're so tired. You're always tired."

She takes a deep breath, digging her fingernails into his wrists to steady herself.

"Is it the nightmares?" He says, after a moment. She nods, biting her lip, choking on her breath. He clings to her tighter, pushing her head into his chest. The air around them stands still.

"It's my fault, Mike." She says, gasping for air. It's miraculous, really, how the world can shatter into a million pieces in an instant.

"It's my fault you don't sleep."

"That's not true."

"Friends don't lie." She snaps, because she knows. She knows the nightmares affect him too, more than he lets on. And of course, there is the small matter of their shared calls at three in the morning. Those never stopped.

She calls him when she needs him, simple as that. And if it's really bad, he shows up on her front porch, shivering in his pajamas. He clings to her, talks to her, until they both calm down enough to go their separate ways.

"If you need me, you call me." He says. Forcefully. His hand is under her chin, demanding her attention. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He kisses the space between her eyes. They continue walking,

through the slush and snow melt, into the center of town.

They stop in front of her house, on the street corner. The place is a little run down, and small, but it's home. The house has a big porch with a swing, and in the spring she helps her Aunt Becky plant flowers in the several hanging pots and flower boxes that adorn the porch.

Mike wraps her in a hug.

"Get some sleep." He says, his mouth against her ear. She nods, returning his hug.

"Night, Mike." He kisses her, small and soft.

"Night, El."

. . .

She finds her mother sitting at the kitchen table, clasping a cup of tea between her hands. El leans over and kisses her mother on the cheek before taking a seat beside her.

"Mom." She says, gently, searching the older woman's eyes for any sign of distance or fear. There is only warmth.

"Jane." She says, her lips twitching into a smile. She breathes out a sigh of relief, closing her eyes for a minute. El gives her a sad smile.

"How was the movie?" She says, her voice weak but cheerful.

"Great." She says. Her mother stares into her tea, still smiling. El reaches across the table to take her hand.

Her mother is fragile. She drifts like snow. She perpetually walks on a thin sheet of ice, above the same black sea. El knows the nightmares are always there, waiting behind a veil. They are made of the same monsters that interrupt her own sleep.

El remembers the first time it happened, the first time her mom slipped away. There was a broken glass, stumbling words and a stilled tongue, a distant look in wild eyes. Papa stood in the corner.

He continues to haunt them, even now. He's a demon in the walls.

Every time it happens, El fears she's losing her for good.

Something always calls her back, and of course, El is always there to pick up the pieces. It's a cycle, and one that leaves them trembling and in tears, but it helps.

El wonders where she goes, but doesn't ask. Ever. She recalls her own demons, and feels an immediate connection to her mother. Brenner's shadow bathes them both in darkness, but they'll survive it. Together.

At first, it was slow going. El didn't move in right away, but she visited several times a day. In August of '85, Becky bought this house, smack in the middle of Hawkins. Despite the corpse of Hawkins Lab, and the demons, her mother insisted they stay.

Now, they are still learning. They are healing, and catching up on thirteen years of lost time. El tells her stories, about her adventures with the boys, or ones that Mike made up just to entertain her. She reads to her mother, or braids her hair. Terry will give her a smile.

"You have school tomorrow, Hon. Get to bed." El nods, standing up. In the hall, her Aunt Becky wraps her in a hug and shoves her playfully towards the stairs. She pulls off her jacket and wet socks, crawling under the blankets. She shivers, gooseflesh creeping up her skin as she turns over to stare at the ceiling. She's tired, yet her mind races and for some reason, it's hard to breathe.

She wakes with her fingers tightening around the sheets. Her breath is like ice in her chest, heavy and sharp. She blinks, giving her head a little shake. It's dark and the window in her room is frosted and foggy. The soft, orange light from the street lamp outside falls in squares across the carpet. The air stands still. In the distance, she hears a siren begins to wail.

El detaches herself from the sheets, immediately going through the motions. Things Hopper taught her, like breathing exercises. She considers calling Mike, gazing longingly at the Super Com. It sits on her bedside table, silent and stoic. She pushes the desire away, remembering the circles under his eyes.

Tonight, the nightmares were a bit different. Distant, as if she was watching through somebody else's eyes, or through a long tunnel. It's a little familiar, though. Almost like all those times Papa told her to listen. When she was a weapon and a spy.

She struggles to remember the dream with no success.

She returns to the blankets as her heart slows, pauses to brush against Mike's mind, because she knows he probably felt the dream. At least the edges of it. Their shared nighttime disturbances go beyond the Super Com.

The nightmares have been less frequent in the recent months. They are few and far between, but when they arrive, they're terrible. Mike knows, because he gets them too. Sometimes his mind is so entangled with hers that they wake from the same nightmare, with the same, awful panic and blind fear.

He's told her all of this, and somehow, it makes her feel better and worse at the same time. Better that they can fight it together. Worse that he's taking the brunt of something that she should be dealing with on her own. It's her fault.

She closes her eyes, still sucking in deep breaths through her nostrils. She counts to five.

In and out.

In and out.

In.

Out.

. . .

She throws open the door, arms laden with her jacket and shoes, backpack slung over one shoulder, a half-eaten eggo in one hand. Mike stands on her porch. He glances incredulously at her sock feet.

"Running late?"

"Overslept."

He laughs.

"I don't believe you."

She looks at him reproachfully.

"I'm serious."

She leans against the doorframe, pulling on fuzzy boots. Mike pulls off his gloves and hands them to her. Gratefully, she pulls them on.

"Thanks." She says.

"C'mon, we're gonna be late."

She adjusts her backpack and trots after him, throwing herself into the passenger seat of Nancy's car. The oldest Wheeler girl is home from college for winter break, and she lets Mike drive it occasionally. They are out of breath by the time they race up the steps of the high school just as the bell rings. Mike pulls her into a quick hug, pressing his lips to her forehead briefly.

Did you sleep?

She pushes the question through the familiar threads of consciousness that remain near, almost entwined, with hers.

Yeah. The word is soft and muffled. Though he's always had much more trouble with the connection between them, it's grown so much stronger over the last year or two. Especially when things started to resemble normalcy. Sort of.

You?

"Yeah." He lets her go. She gives his hand a squeeze and rushes off, pushing the everyday nerves away.

She spent the better part of three years getting a haphazard and mix-matched education from Joyce, Jonathan, and Hopper. Mr. Clark pitched in and so did Nancy, and the boys, of course. Hopper finally

decided she was ready for public education just last year, but she was forced to wait out the entire second semester of last year, and the summer, so she could start with the rest of them. This is her first year in a real school, and while the boys are now in the middle of their junior year, Mr. Clark suggested she start as a sophomore so it would be easier to catch up. She doesn't mind at all.

She makes it to her first class on time, and, as always, throws herself into the day's lesson. She never raises her hand, barely speaks, but she soaks it all in with an eagerness unmatched by any of her peers.

They're reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which she finds fascinating. At lunch, she endures Dustin's good-natured teasing and Mike blushes bright red, which makes her blush too, but she kisses him anyway. Hard. To prove a point.

. . .

The lunch bell rings, and she jogs to catch up with Will across the cafeteria. He looks at her in surprise, slows to let her walk beside him.

"What's up?" He says, giving her a good natured smile. He is considerably tall, but not as tall as Mike. She tugs on his shirt sleeve.

"Will, I need to talk to you." She swallows, squinting at him.

He turns to face her, narrowing his eyes.

"About . . . what?"

El takes a breath, twisting her fingers into her t-shirt.

"Look. You've been acting really weird the past couple days. You've been so quiet, Will. You look so tired, all the time. What's going on?"

Will blinks at her, eyes darting over her face.

"Nothing. Nothing's going on, El. Really. I have this huge Physics test Thursday, and I've been studying, and . . . Really, it's nothing." He says, biting his lip.

"I'm fine."

El searches his face, chewing on the inside of her cheek. She sees the lie in his eyes.

"Alright." She says, quietly. She takes a step back.

"Take care of yourself, Will."

He stares at the floor.

"You too, El." He meets her eyes briefly. She shivers.

"Don't worry about me."

She forces a smile, turning the corner to her next class.

. . .

After the last bell rings, El finds Mike sitting on the front steps of the school, buried in a textbook. She wraps her jacket tighter around her, plopping herself down beside him. A light snow has begun to fall.

"Hey." He says distractedly.

"D&D today?" He says, glancing up at her. She brushes the snow from the locks of dark hair that stick out from under his beanie and fall in waves across his forehead.

"Yeah."

"Well, let's get going before we freeze."

He closes the book, stands, offers her his hand. She takes it, and they trudge through the thin layer of powdered snow.

He pulls out of the parking lot, fiddling with the radio. They arrive at the Wheeler house in mere minutes. In the kitchen, Holly greets them dressed in a little apron patterned with cherries.

"I'm making cookies." She says, cheerfully.

"Good. I'm starving." Mike says, peeling off his jacket. El smiles as

seven year old Holly trots up to her and hugs her around the middle, before handing her a still-warm chocolate chip cookie.

Mike grabs El's wrist and directs the cookie towards his mouth, taking a bite. She smacks his arm away, glaring at him.

Holly rolls her eyes, something she undoubtedly picked up from Nancy. El can barely contain her laughter at the sight.

Mrs. Wheeler walks into the kitchen, smiling when she sees El.

"Hey, El. What are you two up to?"

"D&D campaign, I have to get it done by Saturday." Mike says, around a mouthful of cookie. Mrs. Wheeler's eyebrows shoot up.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Michael. And homework *first*." She gives him a pointed look.

"Alright, alright." He says, knowing it's pointless to argue. He grabs El's hand, dragging her down the basement steps.

In the basement, El and Mike sit on the couch. She is buried in *Julius Caesar*, nose almost brushing the pages. Mike gnaws on his pencil, struggling through a pile of Physics homework.

Holly comes down the stairs to join them, beginning to work on a new coloring book. She, too, chews on the end of her pencil, something Mike is notorious for. El watches her from across the room, smiling a little. She sees both Nancy and Mike wrapped into the youngest Wheeler. It's amusing.

When Mrs. Wheeler calls Holly upstairs, El finally voices the thoughts that have been eating her from the inside.

"Do you think Will is acting weird?"

"What do you mean?" He looks up from his paper, meeting her gaze.

"He's been really quiet lately. Like, quieter than usual. He's got those big circles under his eyes. I don't know. He's just not like himself."

Mike nods.

"Yeah, I guess I've noticed that. I figured it was just that test we have coming up."

"He already gave me that excuse."

"Well, there's your answer. He's just worried about it. He probably stayed up late studying."

"He was lying." El says, quietly. "I know he was lying. Something isn't right."

Mike swallows, giving her a hard look.

"I don't know, El." His eyes drop back to his paper, but his pencil is still. She knows he's thinking about Will. Concern for their friend, and curiosity, festers in the back of her own mind. She doesn't bring it up again.

After a few hours, Mike throws his homework aside, falling against El. He sighs loudly.

"I'm done." He says, voice muffled.

"Me too." She says.

"D&D?"

"Food first?"

"Agreed."

She perches herself on the counter as Mike makes popcorn in the microwave. He pulls a jar of peanut butter out of the cabinet and two spoons.

"God, I love this stuff." She says, taking the jar from his hands and scooping some into her mouth with her finger.

"Don't let my mom see you do that, she'll have a cow." He warns.

El sucks in a breath.

"Oops."

"It's okay. Let's go back to the basement."

"So, what do you have left to do?" She asks him, making her way down the steps.

"I have to figure out this one part . . . we go into this forest, and there are trolls there, but I feel like I've used trolls so many times already. So, I'm looking at bringing in a new monster, but to do that I need a whole new plot twist . . ."

He trails off as they reach the basement, looking at her.

"What about the Demogorgon?" She says, the corner of her mouth twitching into a smirk.

"Never again." He says, putting his hands on her shoulders. She wraps her arms around his neck, laughing a little. He shakes his head, grinning widely.

"Never again."

. . .

Her eyelids begin to drop as she sorts through another page of scrawled notes, trying to distinguish one from the rest. She's supposed to be weeding out mistakes and sorting the notes into something resembling a plot line. Mike is working on a map, penciling in the names of various places in his newest, greatest realm.

The quiet is calming, and she leans against him so their shoulders press together, covering her yawn with her hand.

"What do you think about this? Listen, I start with the Thessalhydra, which hides in the cave right . . . here." He points to the place on the map. She nods, following his thoughts.

"They can avoid it by cutting through the forest, but it's actually a trap . . ." He rambles on, and she closes her eyes for a moment, watching the campaign as it plays out in his head. It's haphazard and messy, but it's beautiful. It's growing and rewriting itself, and it will

be his greatest yet.

"I think . . . you need a break. It's really good, Mike. It's great, but we've been at it for hours." He rolls his eyes, trying to conceal a yawn.

"Tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay."

He sets the map aside, leaning back. She reaches for the remote, turning on the T.V. *The Empire Strikes Back* comes on, only a few minutes in. He stretches himself out on the couch. She makes herself a nest of blankets on the floor. They're quiet for a long time, watching the movie.

"YouwannagototheSnowBallwithme?" His words blend together as he blurts the question. El props herself on one elbow, squinting at him.

"What?"

Mike sits up, looking at her. His expression softens, and he bites his lip.

"Do you . . . want to . . . go to the Snow Ball . . . with me?" He says, slower this time. He swallows hard, cheeks reddening. El sits up, giving him a wide grin.

"Mike, are you kidding? Of course!" She says. He smiles, starting to chuckle. She giggles.

"Oh, good." He says, leaving the couch to join her on the floor. She leans into him.

"I think it's supposed be at the end of this month." He tells her, planting a kiss on her forehead.

She recalls another time, another mention of the Snow Ball. That time, though, she was dying on a table in Mr. Clark's science classroom. It seems silly that they'd never gone before, despite the fact that he'd asked her almost four years earlier.

El continues to grin to herself. She'd have to buy a dress and shoes and there'd be music and dancing . . .

"I was worried you were gonna say no." He says. She shoves him playfully.

"Technically, I already said yes." She reminds him.

"Four years ago!"

"I meant it."

They had their own Snow Ball in the basement, mid January, 1985. Dustin, Lucas, and Will were there, too. Music blasted out of Jonathan's big speaker that he let them borrow. They danced, albeit a little awkwardly, but that was okay because El wasn't really good at dancing either. She spent most of her time giggling uncontrollably at their antics.

They were joined by little Holly, who'd gripped El's wrists and they spun around in big circles, laughing. The boys managed to play a little bit of D&D and Atari, until they were all consumed by an intense pillow fight that lasted long into the night. El swore it was the most fun she'd ever had in her entire life.

And Mike found himself watching her, watching the way she laughed as she danced with his baby sister Holly, barefoot in the basement. Watching the way she blushed when they held hands, even though they always held hands, but somehow it was different that night.

They're really going this time. To the real thing. Mike can't keep his mind off the dance all through the first part of the movie. He can't keep himself from replaying things in his head. They've come so far, and he knows it. And she's not dead or stuck in the Upside Down or locked up in that . . . lab . . . and he's so happy. She's here and she's his and they're really going to the Snow Ball. Together.

Her hand finds his. After a while, his thoughts slow down. His brain becomes syrupy and sluggish. She, too, struggles to stay awake, watching the movie through half-closed eyes.

Mike's breathing slows, his head falls against her shoulder. She feels

herself falling asleep and allows it, because his presence is warm and she's seen the movie a thousand times and they're finally going to the Snow Ball.

. . .

Nancy shakes them awake, wearing thick red lipstick and a long, black jacket. El jumps to her feet. She smirks, arms folded over her chest.

"I almost ran upstairs to get Dad's camera." She says. Mike blushes bright red.

"What's all this about?"

"We were working on a campaign." El tells her, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Sure." Nancy says, voice dripping with skepticism. She clicks her tongue.

"Where were you?" Mike says, changing the subject.

"The movies. With . . . Jonathan." She says. Mike wiggles his eyebrows.

"When's the wedding?" Nancy rolls her eyes, letting out a long sigh.

"Jesus, Mike, it's one date."

"Sure." He stands, grabbing El's hand.

"I'll drive you home."

2. Roll the Dice

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know anything about D&D.

"Will the Wise is burdened by a mysterious disease. The fever has made him deranged, a madman. He ran off, and the Proud Princess has gone to rescue him. They haven't seen her in a day. King Tristan sends the Party off, to look for their lost brothers. They hear news of disturbances near a mountain range in a distant land. There's a cave in the North. Some say it holds the cure to the pestilence that plagues Will the Wise. Some say evil lives there . . . The remaining members of the Party make a treacherous journey. After several days of exhausting travel, they arrive." Mike says, looking around at the four of them.

They are crowded around the table in the basement, immersed in Mike's latest, greatest campaign. A greasy pizza box containing a single, cold slice of pepperoni lies forgotten on the floor. Empty soda cans are scattered about the room.

Dustin has taken to pacing the length of the room fretfully, tugging at his hat. Mike is stooped over his Dungeon Master's manual and a collection of crumpled pieces of paper, eyes flicking over his hastily written notes. His knee bounces agitatedly, making the table shake.

"You enter the cave, quickly. As you continue deeper into the cavern, it gets harder to see. Ahead of you, a huge, gaping hole awaits . . ."

"Is it a portal?" Dustin yells, looking anxious.

"Shut up." Lucas hisses, through gritted teeth. He turns to Mike, fidgeting in apparent excitement. "Go on, what is it?"

Mike rolls his eyes, but he's grinning.

"It's a portal! Will the Wise and the Proud Princess stand near it. It's sucking you in! Will, your action!" Mike yells. Will blinks, surprised.

"Uhh. . . I . . . stuff the portal in my Bag of Holding?" He says, unsure.

Mike shakes his head.

"That won't work. The Bag of Holding is forever lost in the portal's perilous depths. Sorry, Will . . ." Mike thumbs through his notes. "Ummm, the party watches, terrified, as Will the Wise disappears inside the portal. And . . . oh no! The Proud Princess is in danger, too. She's getting sucked in! You have to save her! Dustin, your action!" Dustin shifts, eyes flicking to his friends' expectant faces.

"Uh . . . uh, I . . . try to go into the portal to bring them back?"

"Dude, what? That's too risky." Lucas groans, slapping his palm across his forehead. "You need some kind of protection. What if there's something bad in there?"

"Oh, right. Uh, I'll use my Ring of Protection and investigate the portal."

Mike nods.

"You continue toward the portal with the Ring of Protection. Wait, uh oh . . . it closes suddenly. The Proud Princess is trapped inside! You feel along the wall of the cavern, but it's just stone. The portal has disappeared . . ."

"What the hell . . . what do I do?!" Dustin yells, yanking on his hat in agitation. El giggles. Mike is grinning. Lucas swears under his breath.

"Inside the portal, Will the Wise and the Proud Princess are stuck in . . ." Mike drums his fingers on the table. "The Vale of Shadows!"

Lucas groans, nervously chewing on a fingernail. Will gasps, eyes wide.

"No . . ."

"Will and the princess search for a way back. But it's dark . . . you hear rustling in the brush to your left. The Proud Princess steps forward to investigate and comes face to face with three travelers. They are lost, and weak from being trapped in the Vale of Shadows for so long . . . they warn you of a new threat. Then, you hear it . . . a monster. It crashes through the mossy trees, towering above you-"

"What is it?" Will yells, looking at Mike fearfully.

"It raises it great, lizard-like head and sniffs the air . . . the Tarrasque." The boys shout in protest. Lucas throws up his hands, cursing.

"What?! Hell no . . . We're in deep, deep shit right about now." He says, literally tearing at his hair. Lucas laughs, maniacally. Mike fidgets in his chair.

"It smells your pungent, human scent!" Mike yells. "It comes toward you. Boom . . . boom . . . BOOM!"

"Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit." Will says, looking at the die.

"Will, your action?"

"What do I do?" He says, weakly, looking at the others for help. Dustin shakes his head, shrugging his shoulders. Lucas sucks in a breath.

"Uhhhh, try the biggest baddest spell you have?"

"But he's got Spell Resistance. . . "

"I can only cast fireball . . . or protection . . ."

"Fireball him!"

"But . . ."

"Fireball him!"

Will takes the dice, rolls. Eight.

"Shit!"

"The Tarrasque, rearing up. The Proud Princess jumps to your defense. The three travelers, too, come to your aid . . ." Mike pauses, searching for his notes. "Meanwhile, new portals are opening outside of the Vale of Shadows. Dustin the Dangerous and his comrades arm themselves to fight as several monsters spill from the portal openings

all around. Most of them are Troglodytes and weaker beings. Still, they pose a threat. Some of them crawl into the rivers, and they are spread all over the realm. The Party must hunt them down. Dustin, you find yourself cornered by a Giant Slug. Your action . . . "

"I . . . cast . . . a delayed blast fireball." Dustin says, holding his breath as the die tumbles across Mike's board. He sighs with relief as he comes off lucky.

"You cast a delayed blast fireball. The slug explodes into bits of slime and goo . . ."

Mike runs a hand through his hair, glancing at El. She smiles, giving him an encouraging nod.

"Back in the Vale of Shadows, the princess and our three mysterious travelers help Will the Wise as he attempts to defeat the Tarrasque. They have powerful spells of their own. The monster is greatly weakened. Will steps forward to deliver the final blow . . ." Will looks at the four of them, then down at the die in his palm.

"Here goes nothing . . ."

It rolls across the board. The number eleven faces up. It burns itself into their eyes. Mike raises his eyebrows. El just laughs.

"Well, what a coincidence . . ." She says, grinning. Mike chuckles, incredulous. He launches back into the story, barely missing a beat.

"Despite his sickness, Will the Wise has just enough strength to cast the last offensive attack. The Tarrasque withers, defeated, and blood leaks from the many wounds in its armored skin." Mike says, slamming his hand on the table. The boys roar in triumph. Lucas jumps up and down, clapping Will on the back. Dustin wraps his arms around El's middle and hikes her onto his shoulder, parading her around the room. She can't seem to control her laughter. Will pumps his fist in the air, eyes alight. Mike talks faster, grinning broadly.

"The force of its defeat is enough to open a portal near Will the Wise and the others. They escape, bringing the three travelers with

them, to safety. The Party, tired from defeating so many monsters, is glad to see them. The portals close, and the realm is once again safe from the horrors of the Vale of Shadows . . ." Mike slams his manual shut, for emphasis.

"We defeated the Tarrasque!"

. . .

"You rewrote it." El says. Mike nods, sheepishly.

"Yeah. I don't know why. The idea just . . . fell into my head. It felt right. Ya know?"

El nods, amused. Mike kisses her cheek, lightly.

"Goodnight, El."

They're standing on her porch. She gives his hand a small squeeze.

"Night, Mike."

She makes her way over the threshold, giving Mike a little wave before she closes the door. Inside the entryway, she leans against the door, fingers still grasping the knob. Her smile quickly fades, though, as she mulls over the campaign. The Vale of Shadows . . . Will the Wise's odd pestilence. . . a portal? It's oddly familiar, and all of sudden she's thinking of the dark circles under Will's eyes and his aura of exhaustion.

She bites her lip, pushing the foul thoughts away. An odd coincidence indeed . . .

3. Life As We Knew It

The success of his campaign keeps Mike in a good mood for the rest of the week. Miraculously, his teachers lighten the homework load a little bit. On Tuesday, he meets Lucas and Dustin outside of the Palace, Hawkins' only arcade. He smiles when he sees them, clapping Lucas on the back.

"Oh my God, I thought I'd never get a break. Mrs. Johnson has a huge stick up her butt." Dustin says, rolling his eyes.

"Totally." Mike says, nodding. He pushes the door open, and the three of them race for a spot at the best games.

"Oh my God, I forgot to tell you guys, ya know Max?" Dustin asks as they make their way to the far side of the arcade. Lucas immediately starts up an intense round of *Pac-Man*.

"That red-head chick in our English class? Yeah. What about her?"

"I asked her to the Snow Ball and she actually said yes!" Dustin says excitedly, grinning broadly.

"Woah. Haven't you had a crush on her for, like, ever?" Lucas says, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Yeah."

"Nice work, man." Mike says, clapping Dustin on the back.

"That reminds me, when are *you* gonna ask El?"

Mike raises his eyebrows.

"I already did."

"What? You never told us!"

"I thought you knew . . ." Mike says, looking perplexed. Lucas and Dustin shake their heads, smirking. "I guess I forgot to tell you." He shrugs.

"Well? What'd she say?" Dustin presses him, wiggling his eyebrows. Lucas flicks him.

"Dude, she obviously said yes. They've been dating for like three years." Lucas makes a sappy, sort of terrifying expression that Mike dearly hopes he will never see on his friend's face ever again.

"She said yes." Mike confirms, grinning sheepishly. His mind wanders to familiar thoughts of El, dancing and laughing with him, wearing a pretty dress . . .

"Where's Will? I thought he was coming with us?" Dustin says, looking up from his game so suddenly it gives Mike a start. He glances at the door. A couple of middle school kids push past them, arguing loudly, and Lucas lets out a long groan as he loses his game.

"What did you say, Dustin?"

"Will was supposed to meet us here."

"He told me after school, he isn't coming. Said he had to do some shit for his mom."

"Oh." Mike says, returning his attention to *Donkey Kong*.

"Do you think he's acting weird?" Lucas says, expression turning stony. Mike gives Lucas a hard stare, chewing on his lip.

"I mean, he didn't show up to school yesterday. He didn't tell us why. Something's up with him, ya know?"

Mike nods, and El's voice echoes in his mind.

"El mentioned it last week. She said she asked him about it. She said he lied to her. He told her he was stressed out about that Physics test we had last week. But that test is over, and he's still acting different."

Dustin raises his eyebrows, eyes still glued to the screen as he advances to next level of *Frogger*.

"Dude, El can, like, read minds. If she says Will lied, he lied. And Will never lies. You think we should be worried about him?"

Mike shakes his head, feeling his stomach twist uncomfortably. His fist clenches around the joystick.

"I dunno."

. . .

Mike's mind races as he climbs into Nancy's car and starts the engine, pausing to run his hand through his wild mess of dark curls. It doesn't take him long to get home.

He stomps the snow from his shoes and opens the door. His mom's voice rings from the kitchen, followed by an angry retort that undoubtedly belongs to Nancy. He sighs, taking off his shoes so as to climb the stairs undetected. He reaches his room and closes the door, throwing his backpack on the bed.

He picks up the unfinished book review he should be working on for Honors Lit., stretching out on the bed. The place above his knee gives a familiar twinge as he extends the muscles, and his fingers find it instinctively. It's an ugly wound, a big white lump of scarring. It's been almost three years, and still, it bothers him from time to time.

He makes the pencil move across his paper, but his mind wanders elsewhere. El gives him a familiar push, one he returns cheerfully. He closes his eyes, practicing with the connection. She's been encouraging him, trying to get him to strengthen his mind. He makes his way along the blurry boundaries, feeling her consciousness as a whole. He can imagine her mind, like a beautiful, smeared mess of color and light. The only thing he can see or feel in an endless abyss of are sharp edges and shadows, but there is delicacy too. There are pulses of energy, thoughts that weave together like fabric, or change like water and waves.

He wills himself to look through her eyes. He sees her room. He sees the squares of light on the carpet, the soft green paint on her walls, and the gigantic Star Wars poster he bought her just last year. He's getting better.

She opens up to him like a flower opening to the sun after a particularly long winter. Her mind latches onto him for support, as if

he's the only thing keeping her steady. Like she's spent her whole life unbalanced and dizzy, tossed about in a storm. Which she has. Sort of.

He returns his attention to his paper, but soon tires of it and sets it aside. He pushes his head back onto his pillow, staring at the ceiling. He chases his thoughts around until his mom calls him downstairs for dinner.

. . .

Will's face, a blood trail through the Hawkins Middle gymnasium, and El's mangled corpse are featured in tonight's installment of nightmares. The horrid images are agonizing, and they flash before his eyes like a roll of film, a series of nightmarish freeze frames. He can't hear his own voice. He suffocates, sinks to his knees.

Mike wakes, drenched in a cold sweat. He scrambles out of bed, throwing open his bedroom window. He sucks in a great breath, slumping against the wall. He tries to blink the black spots from his vision.

It wasn't El's nightmare. It was something entirely his own. He recalls Will, shadowed and weak and deranged, and he shivers.

Mike crosses the room and walks out into the carpeted hallway. He tiptoes down the stairs, silent on sock feet. In the kitchen, he pours himself a glass of water, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. He counts his breaths. He is wide awake. Still gripping his glass of water with white knuckles, he pushes open the door to the basement and makes his way down the stairs. The clock reads 3:06 AM.

He paces the floor, glancing at the clock every few minutes. His mind races, and his body hums with adrenaline.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Mike calls up Will's image. His friend's hallowed, pale face is clear in his mind.

Do you think Will is acting weird?

El's voice, twisted and knotted with fear for their friend.

Do you think Will is acting weird?

Lucas, exchanging worried glances with him in between games of Pac-Man.

Mike shakes his head, trying to clear it. He hates this feeling, this cold, sick worry. He should've talked to Will. He should've said something. He recalls the past month, realizing this has been going on for almost three weeks. Back upstairs, he picks up the Super Com and switches it on with shaking fingers.

"Will?"

There's the disappointing crackle of static, then silence.

"Will, it's Mike. Do you copy? Over." He slams the Super Com down on his bedside table.

"Will it's Mike, do you copy? Will? Will, answer me. Over." Nothing.

"Dammit, Will." He growls, running his hand through his hair. Heat rises to his cheeks as a sort of panic sets in, squeezing his chest. Why is this *just now* starting to worry him?

"Mike?" He whips around, staring at the Super Com.

"El?"

"What's going on? You alright?" Her voice, tinged with worry, is interrupted by short bursts of static. He sits on his bed, pinching the bridge of his nose to relieve some pressure.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Everything is fine. Go back to sleep."

"Friends don't lie." She reminds him.

He forces a laugh.

"Mike, what's wrong?"

Nightmare. He responds without speaking.

Want to talk? Her response is immediate.

"No. No, I'm okay. It's just . . . Will. I think you're right. There's something up with him. He didn't show up to school yesterday, and when he came today he looked . . . bad. He looked really bad."

El brushes against his consciousness, and he feels some of the weariness fade.

"We need to talk to him. It's almost . . ." Mike swallows hard, gripping the Super Com with both hands. "It's almost like he was when he came back from . . ."

"The Upside Down." She spits the words venomously.

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow." She says, giving him a little push. "Tomorrow, we'll talk to him. Together."

Promise?

Promise.

. . .

Will doesn't show up to school that next morning, nor the day after. Thursday afternoon, Mike finds El leaning against the flag pole, waiting for him. He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek, and they set off through the thick snow fall.

"I don't have Nancy's car today, so we have to walk." He tells her, taking her hand. She gives him a smile, presses her hip against his leg.

"Okay."

The walk to the Byers' house is long, especially with all the snow on the roads. It keeps getting into his boots, soaking his socks and numbing his toes. El keeps her arms around his waist, gritting her teeth at the cold. They talk about the Snow Ball for a little while, until their conversation lapses into comfortable silence. The sun begins to sink, staining the sky a soft orange.

They reach the Byers' house after dark. Mike marches up to the door, hammering on it with his fist. After a few seconds, Joyce opens the door. She is dressed in her work clothes, her hair pulled back in a messy knot. She grips the collar of the Byers' big, scruffy dog. The mutt wags its tail, barking excitedly. El drops to her knees and reaches out to pet him, grinning widely as the dog lunges forward and licks her face. Joyce offers Mike a soft smile.

"Mike! El! What can I do for you?"

"Is Will here?"

She bites her lip.

"Yeah, he's in his room. He's sick. I think he has the flu."

"Can we talk to him?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . It's probably best if you don't. He needs his rest, and I don't want you to catch something."

"We really need to talk to him." Mike says, a little desperately. El gets to her feet, taking his hand without really thinking about it. Their fingers lace together instinctively.

"Is there something wrong, Mike?" Joyce asks him, quietly. She gives him a hard stare. Mike meets her eyes for a moment, then he drops his gaze to their clasped hands. He feels El shift uncomfortably beside him.

Mike doesn't want to worry Joyce Byers. Not after everything her family has been through. Even after four years, Joyce still has panic attacks and anxiety issues. The doctors call it Post Traumatic Stress. Nancy had mentioned it. Jonathan mentioned it. The last thing he wants to do is plant *that* seed.

"No, nothing's wrong. Tell Will we came by, okay?" He says, forcing a smile.

"Of course."

. . .

Will does not come to school on Friday. While everyone else at school are scrambling to find dates for the Snow Ball, Mike is scrambling to figure out what's going on with his friend. He exchanges worried glances with his friends as they walk to their first class. When he voices his concerns, Dustin and Lucas try to reassure him.

"Dude, he's just sick. He'll probably be back on Monday." Lucas says. Dustin nods in agreement, though both seem a little weary.

Mike sees the stress in El's eyes, the worry. They both know this isn't some sickness, that this has been going on for far longer than a few days. Everything inside his head screams for answers.

She's unusually withdrawn and quiet during their walk home. Her hands shake, so he grabs ahold of them.

When they reach her house on the corner, she turns around to face him. She gives him a hard stare. Her eyes are glossy, like she's fighting back tears.

"Mike."

"El." He says, quietly. She's battling with herself. He can feel the conflicting emotions, and he tightens his grip on her hands.

"Something's wrong." She says, biting her lip. She bursts into tears.

"El." Mike whispers, pulling her into his arms.

"Talk to me." He says. He fights to keep his voice steady. She shakes her head, taking a few deep breaths. She sucks in air through her nostrils, suddenly breaking from his embrace. She wipes her nose with her sleeve.

"I have to go."

"El . . ." He starts, taking a step toward her. She steps back, pushing him away.

"See you tomorrow." She says, with a ghost of a voice. Her back is turned to him. He tugs on her sleeve, but she wrenches her arm from his grasp.

"El, wait." He says, following her up the steps.

She shuts the door in his face.

Mike stops in his tracks, as if she'd just slapped him in the face. He stands, hand resting on the door for who knows how long, heat rising in his cheeks, forcing himself to remain steady. It happened so fast, and he fights the urge to bang on the door, to follow her inside. He doesn't.

"Fuck." He swears to himself, turning around, dragging himself down the steps. "Damnit, El."

He kicks himself, replaying the whole exchange over and over again in his head. It's not like her. It's *not* her. It's *not* her. Something is wrong. Something is definitely wrong. And he can't fix it. He can't help her.

By the time he makes it home, tears are threatening to fall onto his cheeks. He slams the front door behind him, taking the steps two at a time.

He's frustrated. Sixteen year old guys aren't supposed to cry. Not like this. Not over girl trouble, if you could even call it that. What he has with El . . . it's different. Simply calling her his girlfriend seems like too simple of a word, too much of a petty label.

"Michael?" He can hear his mother's voice from the living room. He ignores her, wiping his eyes furiously.

He shuts his bedroom door, quieter this time, praying she won't follow him. He grabs the Super Com, sinking to his knees.

"El." He says, loudly. His emotions are out of control. He's shaking.

"El. El you need to talk to me. Tell me what's wrong." He tries to give her a mental push, still wiping his eyes.

"Damnit, El. El! Talk to me."

No answer, only the fucking static and the radio silence. Mike knows she's listening. She's always listening, always there. But for the first

time in a long time, there's some distance between them. She's there, but she remains out of reach. It tears him apart.

He doesn't know how to fix this.

4. Bleeding Noses, Bleeding Knuckles

El sinks to her knees at the foot of the bed, choking on her own tears. Her whole body shakes, and she curls her hands into fists to hold on as the world careens out of control.

She feels the familiar numbness, the uncontrollable fight for oxygen. She's drowning, and the room around her dissolves.

White tiles. Blood. Papa peers at her from the doorway, long fingered hand resting on the knob. His thin mouth curls into a grimace.

"You must obey my instructions, Eleven. You disobey me. You must be punished."

El is back in her twelve year old body, still trembling, vision clouded with tears. She doesn't understand. She wants to obey him, but she does not want to hurt that man. That man, who screams and bleeds and begs for her mercy. Papa wants her to hurt him. If she hurts him, she is a good girl. He tells her she is a good girl. She thinks Papa is wrong. If she hurts that man, then she is killer. She is bad. She is very bad.

Papa slams the door, and she is tossed headfirst into complete darkness. The walls seem to close in on her, and she is once again reminded that her life is worth nothing. She's animal, a beast that must be caged. She sinks to her knees, hospital gown rough against her fragile skin. She can hear the man's screams, even now. She can feel his fear. The air tastes like blood.

El resurfaces, back in her bedroom, back on the carpeted floor. She wipes her eyes with shaking fingers, leaning her head against the bed.

Papa used to bring her things. A little stuffed lion. A potted plant. He brought her little candies and sweets when she was a good girl. Once, he brought her music. It was a small machine, a record player. It played the most beautiful music. It was her favorite gift. When he brought her the man, and she didn't hurt him like she was supposed to, he took the music away. She wasn't allowed to have music ever

again.

She's on her feet, tongue sweeping briefly over her lips, tasting the tears. Her fingers brush the surface of a different vinyl, one she received for her fifteenth birthday.

She killed that man, after she spent so long in the room. In her prison cell. Papa brought her out, and she hurt him like she was supposed to. She made him suffer while he screamed and cried like adults aren't supposed to cry. The men in white suits wrote down everything he said. After they were finished, Papa asked her to kill the man. She did as she was told.

She closes her eyes. The vinyl beneath her fingertips cracks in two. She feels the familiar warmth on her upper lip, doesn't wipe it away. In the window, she catches sight of herself. The shadow that stares back at her is alien. She regards her reflection, searching those haunted eyes, wondering how this could've happened.

She was better. Mike and the boys and Joyce made her better. She was almost normal, for a while. And now she's going backwards. Reversing to the twelve year old experiment that escaped Hawkins Lab so many years ago. It happened so fast.

It's hard to breathe. She slumps against the wall, letting the blood drip into her open palm. She watches it pool into the creases in her hand, sliding gracefully down the slope of her wrist.

"El." The walkie talkie hums to life with a pop of static. She opens her eyes, gazing at the little red light.

"El, El you . . . to talk to me. Tell me what's . . wrong." She doesn't move, doesn't make a sound. Her heart breaks. A stab of guilt climbs up her throat.

She is afraid. Whatever is happening to Will, it scares her. And somehow Papa and the Upside Down seem closer. She feels the change. She can feel the shadows pressing on her from all sides. She's fragile.

It's reminiscent of Before. Before the incident, before she returned

from the Upside Down. Before she was given a new name and a new life. It's like she's becoming sick again after a really long remission.

"Damnit, to me."

El picks up the walkie talkie, bites her lip, sets it down again. She runs her hands through her hair, which now falls just past her shoulders.

She can't explain what she feels, only that she knows the less she tells him, the better off he will be. If the Upside Down really is affecting Will, affecting her, she wants Mike as far away from it as possible. If the darkness is there, if the Gate is open again, she doesn't know if she can save herself. But she can save him.

And she can help Will.

She bites her lip, pushing such terrible thoughts away. She closed the Gate. The Demogorgon is dead.

Right?

El runs through the list of all the clues throughout the past few weeks.

Will's haunted eyes. A resurgence of nightmares. The way she can feel the darkness, even now. Even here, in her own bedroom. It's what pushed her to a breaking point today. It's all too familiar . . .

She crawls under the blankets, letting her breathing return to normal. She wipes the blood from her upper lip, staring at the walkie talkie from the crack in the sheets. Mike tries to contact her several more times, then the device falls silent. His words are choked with tears, and it takes a great amount of self-control to keep from reaching for it.

Aunt Becky calls her for dinner. Hesitantly, she emerges from her cocoon of blankets. On her way out, she double checks her reflection in the mirror. She wipes the faint traces of blood from her face, forces herself to stand a little straighter.

. . .

2:13 AM.

She sobs into the Super Com, screaming for Mike. He answers in milliseconds, and he's crying, too. She can't breathe, she just holds her finger on the button, listening to his own sniffing. She trembles, holding her hand to her nose as she feels the familiar burst of warmth and wet on her upper lip. She feels it dripping from her ears, too. The steady stream traces a path along her jawline, staining the collar of her shirt.

It's the first time a nightmare has made her bleed.

She's afraid to wake her mother, afraid it will bring on another panic attack or something awful. There are just too many bad memories. Sobs wrack her body, and she can't think straight.

In and out. In . . . out . . .

"El? El, you still there?" Mike 's voice filters through the Super Com.

"Yes." She breathes, letting her forehead fall against the walkie talkie. It feels like he's in the room with her. Instinctively, she projects herself into his mind for an anchor.

"Nightmare." She tells him.

"I know." He tells her. "I'm coming over there."

"Mike." She says, softly. "Hurry."

It is mere minutes, she hears the sound of tires on snow. His headlights are off, and she watches from the window as he springs out of Nancy's car wearing a Superman t-shirt and sweatpants.

She takes the stairs with sock feet, silent, hurtling through the darkness.

They collide on the porch, sink to their knees.

"Bleeding." El warns, trying to keep from staining his shirt. The red leaks from the spaces in between her fingers as she tries to staunch the flow.

"Don't worry about it." He says, shaking his head. So she lets her forehead fall against him. He holds her while she cries, and she can't breath or think or stop the shaking in her hands. When she's cried herself out, the bleeding has stopped. She wipes her face with her hand. He brushes the hair out of her eyes. El begins to hiccup uncontrollably, stinging eyes fixated on the snowy road.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head.

"Stay." She says.

"Let's go inside. You're going to freeze" He says, scooping her up. He carries her over the threshold, into the darkened house. They go into the kitchen, where he sets her down on the counter. Even in the dark, she can see the tears on his cheeks. She reaches up to brush them away, feeling that squirming guilt in the pit of her stomach.

She hates this. She hates that everything she feels has some effect on him. She keeps him up at night, she interrupts his sleep, she makes him feel sad or angry or scared even though the emotions don't belong to him. And he takes it, embraces it, because he knows it makes her feel better. She knows it's true, and nothing he can do or say will convince her otherwise.

He shoves a glass of water into her hand. She takes small sips, watching him in the dark. Mike never takes his eyes off her, and she can see his lip trembling. His nostrils flare, and suddenly she's afraid he's going to bolt or shatter into a million pieces in front of her.

Instead, he slams his fist into the countertop. The sound makes her jump about five feet in the air. She reaches out to grab his arm, feels him shaking under her hand. Three of his knuckles are split, and blood stains her fingers.

"Sorry." He mumbles, reaching for a paper towel.

"Don't." She says, taking it from his hand. She presses it onto the wound. She feels all of the fight go out of him. She scoots off the counter to move closer to him. He sinks to his knees, bringing her

down to the tiled floor with him. Tentatively, he takes the paper towel from her fingers and begins to clean her face, starting with her ears and working his way to her upper lip. His fingers caress her cheeks.

He breaks down then, and her eyes fill with tears at the sight of his face, at the pain written in it. They hold each other. They are bleeding noses and bleeding knuckles. They are not lost, though.

They are each other's anchor. They'll get through this.

. . .

She doesn't remember when her sobs finally subsided. She doesn't remember when he finally stopped shaking. She doesn't remember the exact point during the night when it started to get better. She remembers calming down enough to get words out, but there weren't really any words at all. Just the raw emotions clawing their way to the surface and the scent of him and the sound of his breathing.

Through the earliest hours of the morning, Mike sat with her on the cold tiled floor while his knuckles bled and the nightmare remained fresh in both of their minds.

. . .

Terry Ives makes her way down the carpeted stairs on silent feet. She wears two socks on each foot. Her feet get cold easily. Bad circulation. Her hair falls in lazy strands around her face, framing her sharp, lined features. She is young, even though you can't tell by looking at her. She was beautiful once.

Grey light filters through the windows in the living room.

Her frail hands hug the pale blue sweatshirt she wears closer to her body. On the landing, she gazes across the room.

She sees them sprawled on the floor. The Wheeler boy leans against the kitchen cabinets with his cheek resting against the top of her daughter's head. Jane, still so small and fragile at the age of sixteen, nestled on the floor beside him.

She freezes.

What could've happened last night, while she slept? And why was the Wheeler boy there to comfort her daughter, when she could've easily been there to help?

She blinks, giving her head a small shake.

She knows, of course. She knows her daughter. She knows the Wheeler boy, and she knows what they are to each other.

She swallows, taking a last glance at the pair of them, folded on the tiles. Sleeping, pale-faced but seemingly peaceful.

She just wishes Jane would let her be, well, a mom. She supposes she lost the right to that title a long time ago.

5. Relapse

The nightmares come often, and they are brutal. Agonizing. She knows that the thing that is keeping Will under the weather is not a common cold.

Something is wrong. Of the Demogorgon variety.

She doesn't know what's going on, only that something is off. She can feel something in Will, she can see through the lies.

She goes to his house on Sunday morning. Alone. She doesn't bother knocking.

She finds Will sitting on the floor in his bedroom, sketching.

"Will." She growls, marching straight through the doorway. He gives a start when he sees her. She stops short when she sees his face, the withered, gaunt skin and sharp cheekbones. His skin is grey, his eyes dark and distant.

"Will?" She says, tentatively.

"Hey, El." He says, tiredly. He coughs, and it rattles his whole body.

"I . . . I just wanted to . . . um . . ." She stammers, hand reaching for the door knob. She blows air through her nostrils.

"Something is wrong with you." She says, roughly. Will swallows, averting his gaze.

"Something is wrong with you, Will. You don't have the flu. Alright? Don't try to lie. Friends don't lie." She says, pausing. Her eyes are fixated on him. "What's wrong?"

Will shakes his head.

"Nothing's wrong." He says. El bites her tongue, looking at him.

"Will . . ." She starts, glaring at him. Will springs to his feet, suddenly overcome with a coughing fit. He doubles over, eyes watering, hand

cupped to his mouth.

"Will?"

He pushes past her, barely making it to the bathroom before he slumps over the sink. Several slimy, greenish slugs fall out of his mouth and onto the white ceramic. His white-knuckled hands grip the sides of the sink with both hands as he dry heaves for a few moments. El watches, repulsed, as the living creatures make their way down the drain.

Finally, he resurfaces, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He gives her a small look of reproach through watery eyes, swallowing hard.

"Will . . ."

"You can't tell my mom." He snaps. "Or Jonathan. Or Mike. Or anybody. Alright?"

"Will, I can't just-"

"El. You have to promise me. You can't tell anyone. I'm fine, I just . . . it happened a long time ago, when I first came out of the Upside Down. It happened for a couple months, and then it stopped. I went back to normal, everyone went back to normal. Well, last month, it happened again. These slugs, they come out of me. And it's like it was dormant for a while, and then something inside me just . . . woke up."

El searches his face, struggling to take it all in. She gazes at the slug's trail along the inside of the sink, the white tiles on the floor, the snow outside the single window in the bathroom.

"You can't expect me to keep this a secret."

"El. Please. You have to promise me, you won't tell anyone."

"What's happening to you?" She presses him, tears welling in her eyes.

"It's not as bad as it looks." He says, quickly, shifting his weight.

"Really? It looks pretty bad to me." Will falls silent for a moment,

staring at his bare feet.

"Can you feel it, El?" He says, suddenly, head snapping up.

"What?"

"The Upside Down." He says. "It's around us. I felt it when the slugs came back. Something's happening."

El's mind reels.

"You didn't open it, did you?" He says, with a ghost of a voice. She feels her breath catch in her throat. The Gate. He's talking about the Gate.

"No. No, I didn't." She says. Her hands start to tremble. She shoves them into her pockets.

"Is the Demogorgon back?" Will stares at her with wide eyes.

"No." She says, quickly. "No, Will. I don't think so. I think it would've already come for me if it was . . ." She thinks of the nightmares, the negative energy that is ever present.

"Will, listen." She says, placing a hand on his arm.

"I feel it. I really do. I feel the darkness and I feel what I felt during the Incident. And I . . . I've been having nightmares. More than usual." She tells him.

The Incident. It's what they'd been calling that week in November of '83. At least, in public. Will nods, eyes softening.

She swallows, continuing.

"And I think maybe Mike feels it too, because, you know, he can . . . um." She gives her head a little shake. "Nevermind. It's complicated."

Will gives her a hard look. He slumps against the sink. She watches his skin to turn a shade paler.

"You alright?" She says, reaching for him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay." He says, waving her off. "What do we do?"

"I don't know." El whispers, squeezing her eyes shut. She pinches the bridge of her nose to relieve some of the pressure.

"I really think you should tell your mom." She says. "It's not fair to keep something like this from her. Maybe Hopper can help . . ."

"No." He snaps. "No, it has to be this way."

"Wil..."

"What about Mike? You said he can feel . . . things. What does he think?"

"I don't know what he feels." She says, quickly.

"He knows about the nightmares. I don't know if he can feel the . . . Upside Down . . . the way I, er, we can. And I don't want him to. He'll just do something stupid, trying to be the hero." She rolls her eyes.

"You're like . . . his queen. He thinks you're some damsel in distress, but you're not." Will says, laughing weakly. "Somebody needs to get it into his head that you should be the one protecting him. You're like . . . totally badass." He says.

"We protect each other." She says, suddenly defensive. Will forces another laugh.

"Okay. Well, you still haven't promised. This stays between us. We'll figure something out. Alright?" El takes a shuddering breath, closing her eyes. She collects her pieces, one by one. She pulls herself back together like a super-glued china doll.

"El?"

"Alright. I promise."

. . .

A day passes. Then another. Days stretch into long weeks that drag by, sluggish and uneventful. The nightmares are frequent. Will comes

to school, but he remains distant. His secret weighs on El's shoulders, searing hot guilt into her blood. She hates it, but she knows to break that promise now would be nothing short of catastrophic.

So she bites her tongue.

When Mike continues to question Will, she doesn't say anything. She acts just as ignorant as the rest of them.

Will evades their questions expertly, crafting together excuses that seem at least somewhat plausible. To Dustin and Lucas. Mike remains skeptical. El loves him for it, but it makes her feel worse.

She is burdened with the knowledge that Will is extremely sick. He's not getting better. He loses his appetite.

One time, at the Wheelers, she passes by the bathroom door. She can hear him puking in there, and wonders if he's coughing up another of those . . . slugs . . . or if he just can't keep anything down. When she asks him about it, in private, he admits to her worst suspicion. His stomach is too rocky to hold even the blandest food. He's thin and weak and a terrible cough plagues him. She wonders how on Earth he's managed to keep this from his family.

On top of everything that he's going through, she continues to feel the Upside Down, or at least, some essence of it. It's as if the shadows of that place are leaking into the Right Side Up. Though she can't distinguish any sort of gate or rift between the realms, even in the farthest reaches of her consciousness, she knows something isn't right. The thought keeps her up long into the early morning hours.

Mike is incessant, relentless. He's well aware that she's going through something, though doesn't know exactly what. The fact that he can't fix it drives him crazy. He is reluctant to leave her side, even when the bell rings for their next class or El's mom calls her home. The thoughts that exchange between their tangled minds become more frequent. He makes a habit of checking up on her. He's concerned, and he knows the nightmares are getting out of hand. When he walks her home, they remain on the porch, holding each other long after they arrive. Everything he does, everything he selflessly offers her, just makes it worse. She doesn't want to hurt him, so she finds herself

keeping her distance.

Maybe it's stupid. Maybe it's too late to save Mike. He's already fallen over the edge and he's fallen hard.